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The ‘Iranian Diaspora’ and the New Media: From Political Action to Humanitarian Help

Halleh Ghorashi and Kees Boersma

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the shifting position of the ‘Iranian diaspora’ in relation to Iran as it is influenced by online and offline transnational networks. In the 1980s the exilic identity of a large part of the Iranian diaspora was the core factor in establishing an extended, yet exclusive form of transnational network. Since then, the patterns of identity within this community have shifted towards a more inclusive network as a result of those transnational connections, leading to more extensive and intense connections and activities between the Iranian diaspora and Iranians in Iran. The main concern of the article is to examine how the narratives of identity are constructed and transformed within Iranian (charity) networks and to identify the factors that contribute to this transformation. The authors use the transnational lens to view diasporic positioning as linked to development issues. New technological sources help diaspora groups, in this case Iranians, to build virtual embedded ties that transcend nation states and borders. Yet, the study also shows that these transnational connections can still be challenged by the nation state, as has been the case with recent developments in Iran.

INTRODUCTION

For as long as people have looked for new opportunities, resources and biotopes, migration has taken place. It is only in modern times that the displacement of people has occurred under the constraints of nation states, regulations, rules of legitimization and member groups (Wallerstein, 1976). In the modern world, system boundaries — national borders — are seen as regulative elements within the whole process of demographic developments and migration flows. The era of globalization, characterized by what Castells (1996) calls the rise of the network society, has created a foundation for the emergence of newly constructed forms of local and/or transnational cultural ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). One of the impacts of recent globalization is the formation of new offline and online transnational connections among migrants worldwide. The formation of these networked communities is linked to concepts such as home(land) and identity. The

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rates of participation and success of a group's members in a new society have proven to be important for the ways transnational networks and identity construction become interrelated (Kilduff and Corley, 1999).

Although there is a great body of literature on diaspora communities and on social ties and networks, there is little that investigates the construction, impact and content of global, diasporic networks on both a micro and macro level. To reflect upon the interaction between diaspora and transnational networks is important, because it delivers insights into the continuous identity construction of transnational groups and diaspora communities. Exploring the shifting patterns of diaspora communities as they become more involved in development-related activities within their countries of origin is relevant given the increasing focus on the role of diaspora as related to development policies (Haas, 2006).

Growing cultural diversity within nation states, combined with a sense of threat against assumed national and/or cultural identities because of this diversity, have contributed to an increasing tendency towards protecting nation states and national identities. Within this context, a study of diaspora groups from a transnational perspective could help us to rethink the notions of territory and identity. In line with Malkki (1992), we believe that the 'national order of things' still informs many studies when it comes to the positioning of migrants. In this territorial approach migrants are represented as having 'dual citizenships', 'dual lives', and 'frequently maintain[ing] homes in two countries' (Portes, 1997: 812), which is said to lead to 'dual authority and loyalty within the diasporas' (Sheffer, 1996, quoted in Amersfoort, 2001: 14). These approaches take it for granted that immigrants have a sense of belonging to their homeland. The only way to achieve loyalty to the host country then lies in forced assimilation. In this either/or approach nation states and identities are considered closed entities that immigrants choose, or are forced to choose, to step in and out of.

However, the inspiration of this article comes from another body of literature, which focuses on the possibilities of redefining concepts such as identity, home and nation-state, making new approaches possible (Anthias, 2001; Cheah and Robbins, 1998; Vertovec, 2001; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). This focus on transnational identities, in other words, enables us to go beyond the nation state as a fixed point of departure and see it as just as one of several points of reference within the transnational 'order of things'.

Our empirical focus is on general patterns of change related to the 'Iranian diaspora' and its transnational networks. The online and offline transnational activities of this group have been found to be rather significant (Alavi, 2005; Graham and Khosravi, 2002; Khosravi, 2000; McAuliffe, 2007; Spellman, 2004; Sreberny, 2000) despite the fact that this diaspora is quite recent. In addition, the group has proven to be successful in their newly adopted countries (van den Bos and Nell, 2006; Bozorgmehr and Sabagh, 1988; Ghorashi, 2004; Naficy, 1993). By choosing a diaspora group as a case

study, we attempt to show the shifting ways through which diverse forms of connections have been realized. These connections occur through the intersection of spaces, be they local, national or virtual.

It is our aim to contribute to ongoing debates on the framework that the transnational approach provides for looking at diasporic positioning and how it enables us to observe the intersection of time and space. In so doing we will explain how a transnational lens helps us to observe intersecting connections and possibilities in positioning and activism. We also aim to show how diasporic positioning is not about choosing territories but about newly created spaces in which territories overlap. Our main concern in this article is to understand how the narratives of identity are constructed and changed within Iranian (charity) networks and which factors contribute to this change. While the main argument focuses on the dominant patterns of change within the Iranian diaspora, allowing for the diversity of the group (Bozorgmehr et al., 1993; McAuliffe, 2007; Sreberny, 2000), the main challenge is to avoid generalizing and, as a result, homogenizing this group.

DIASPORA AS TRANSNATIONAL NETWORK

Diaspora, in the view of Clifford (1994: 308), 'involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home (and in this it is different from exile, with its frequently individualistic focus)'. He continues: 'Diasporist discourses reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational net-work that includes the homeland, not as something simply left behind, but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntal modernity' (ibid.: 311). The important aspect of Clifford's definition of diaspora, which differs from exile, is the way in which home and return are understood. Unlike exile, diasporic understanding of homeland signifies not a place of return but a source of shifting and ambivalent attachment. In this sense, the past serves as a common base for diverse communities to connect (see also Naficy, 1993: 17). This approach to diasporic positioning contrasts with the traditional definition of diaspora, in which a construction of collective suffering and the urge to return to a national homeland remain central (Cohen, 1997).

The approach to the diasporic condition taken in this article is not defined as (up)rootedness in one or another place (either the country of origin or the new country), but as a state in which different places overlap (Appadurai, 1997; Gilroy, 1997; Hall, 1990, 1992; Malkki, 1995). Many studies show that notions like 'culture', 'homeland' and 'origin' are more complex than can be described by a link to a certain territory or root (Appadurai, 1988; Malkki, 1992). These concepts have become gradually deterritorialized and 'reterritorialized' in a transnational way (Ghorashi, 2004). Within this framework a shift has taken place in defining *identity*. This shift focuses on the

processes involved in constructing, imagining and changing identity amid a variety of cultures and discourses that are articulated and negotiated in a transnational context. In this way, diasporic positioning is not rooted but it is ‘rhizomic’:

> Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states . . . . It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion . . . . The tree is filiation but the rhizome is alliance . . . the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 21, 25)

The rhizomatic network describes here the decentralized, distributed patterns of human organizations. That is not to say that there are no rules and restrictions within these rhizomatic networks, but that the authority and control over migration, transnationalism and diaspora become more distributed and ‘networked’.

Networks are not neutral phenomena. Recent studies offer useful insights into the (hidden) power in network structures (Cross and Parker, 2004). Network analysis builds upon the idea of social capital, which explains how people do better (that is, are more powerful) because they are somehow better connected with other people. Social capital is the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that increases if an individual becomes connected to networks of more or less institutionalized (durable) relationships (Bourdieu, 1990; Burt, 2005; Ibarra et al., 2005; Putnam, 1993). In this way, social capital is linked to one’s identity, not so much in terms of one’s roots but in terms of one’s rhizomatic, networked connections.

The Virtual Dimension of Transnational Networks

Escobar (1994) suggests that the use of new technology — ICT and especially the Internet — has created a new dimension in the ways that social realities are being constructed and negotiated. In this respect, the virtual dimension of networks has proven to be a powerful heuristic to study this social reality (Schultze and Orlikowski, 2001; Shields, 2002). To study this new dimension, the use of a single methodology is not sufficient. We need to experiment with a variety of methods and combine and recombine them in order to grasp the diverse ways in which transnational social realties are negotiated within virtual space and the interactions between the virtual space and the actual, or material world (Hine, 2000; Panagakos and Horst, 2006). Only then will we be able to grasp how rhizomatic networks function and how they are mediated through ICTs. It also casts light on the ways in which use of the Internet within transnational space enables new forms of identity constructions (Hine, 2000).

Recent studies have shown that members of immigrant/diaspora networks, such as the Iranian one, use the Internet not only to form communities inside

nations but also to make cross-border, transnational connections (Bernal, 2006; van den Bos, 2006; van den Bos and Nell, 2006; Ghorashi and Tavakoli, 2006). McAuliffe's (2007) research on the second generation Iranian diaspora in three different cities shows how diverse the meaning of transnational (virtual) space is for Baha'i Iranians as compared to Muslim Iranians. The virtual dimension of networks is an important factor when considering the overlap of spaces within transnational networks, although the importance of these spaces could differ based on the positioning of various groups within the diaspora. In spite of this diversity, technologies such as the Internet and the World Wide Web, multimedia communication and cyberspace modify the nature of interpersonal relations and communication (Abbate, 1999; Castells, 2001; DiMaggio et al., 2001).

From the economic literature the importance of network ties for transactions and knowledge exchange is well known (for example, Granovetter, 1973). Network ties embed the economic action in economic and social structures. The Internet makes new forms of embeddedness possible by means of *virtual embedded ties* — linkages that are initiated and maintained through electronic technologies and that provide other solutions to problems of (knowledge) exchange (Fowler et al., 2004). Virtual ties make creative transmission of information possible and (can) include privately and publicly known information. These features enrich the real 'arm's length ties' to regulate and facilitate social expectations.

The virtual, however, is by no means a concept without problems (Hine, 2000; Shields, 2002; Woolgar, 2002). The assumption that technologies can easily be used to link micro to macro networks in any situation is somewhat naive (Boersma et al., 2009); what is important is to study how the virtual (cyberspace) is interconnected with the offline behaviour, power and identity of the members of a given network. The rhizome network metaphor used above refers not only to spatial and virtual elements but, and perhaps more importantly, to the way in which power is divided. We started this article with the concept of the nation state. Arguably, the nation state no longer has absolute (Hobbesian) power over its citizens. In this respect we observe a paradoxical process in which the power of the nation state is waning in the globalization era, yet at the same time the state is making an intentional effort to enforce intensified hierarchies and hierarchical organizations, for instance by developing transnational policies and initiating migration and transnationalism (Margheritis, 2007). The transnational networks of the diasporic members of the nation state, however, often act at odds with national rules and restrictions.

The diasporic condition is not bound by national rules and regulations, but it is certainly influenced by nation states, be it through national restrictions and/or nationally based patterns of communication and positioning. In this sense, the diasporic condition is about creating chains of networks worldwide, based upon a constructed sense of (cultural) sameness in background

(Vertovec and Cohen, 2002). The meanings attributed to this 'common' identity, however, are anything but static and homogeneous. Rather, they are diverse, heterogeneous, multi-layered and dynamic, because of their contextual and situational characters. Many studies have shown that the meaning attributed by minority groups within a particular diaspora group to this notion of sameness in relation to 'the homeland' is often quite different from that constructed by the majority (Al-Rasheed, 1994; McAuliffe, 2007; Srebreny, 2000). It is precisely the multi-layered and dynamic character of diasporic networks that offers the possibility to enrich individual members of these networks in a variety of ways. Because a network is never complete or absolutely stable — there is a variation in the way people are related to each other — there can be (groups of) people within a network that are unaware of one another. Brokers, or network entrepreneurs, are very important in building bridges from one place in the network to another (Burt, 2005). In what they call the 'diaspora effect', Kilduff and Corley (1999) show that in many ways diasporas have an influence on the nations they have left behind. This effect is not only visible when diaspora groups keep in touch with friends and relatives who remain, but when they create new networks through which they can communicate their new (cultural) competencies as well. They act, intentionally or unintentionally, as brokers within transnational networks.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The research sites for this article have been both physical and virtual and the studies have been based upon ethnographic research methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). The empirical findings and most statements on the Iranian diaspora are based on long-term fieldwork among the Iranian community in California, USA, between 1997 and 2003. After 2003, the fieldwork included attending transnational activities and gatherings of the Iranian diaspora in several European cities, including Amsterdam, Berlin and Vienna. The initial focus of this longitudinal, multi-sited and ethnographic research has been on first generation Iranians with a politically active background. We have chosen, furthermore, to take a contextual approach, meaning that we place Iranian diaspora networks in their unique, historical settings (Pettigrew, 1985).

Although the religious and ethnic backgrounds of the Iranians studied were somewhat diverse, including Armenian and Jewish Iranians, and Azari and Kurdish Iranians, the great majority come from an Islamic background. For many of the Iranians interviewed, it seemed that political identity, as opposed to religious and/or ethnic identity, had been the key defining factor in the way they initially related to Iran and positioned themselves outside Iran. The fact that many of the Iranians interviewed had been politically

active during the revolution of 1979[1] and that many had to leave because of political turmoil, explains the importance of political identity for the majority of the first generation Iranians in diaspora in the 1980s. For years, political identity served as the prime factor of convergence or divergence among the majority of this first generation, transcending differences such as gender, religion and ethnicity. Most of the group remained politically oriented even later, although not all remained politically active.

This background has been used in the study as a general framework to analyse changes in patterns within this diaspora group. However, for the most recent interviews, the focus was on the position of the respondents within Iranian transnational networks and their experiences in charity work, and not on their political, religious or ethnic identities. In the framework of this research, there was also close interaction with certain activists and scholars located in Iran in order to understand how patterns there were influenced by encounters with members of the diaspora within the transnational (virtual) space.

In this article we have included the diaspora perspective through interviews with members of the Iranian diaspora (organizations), and gained information from diverse Internet sources as well as from other kinds of document/literature research. Interviews helped us grasp the perceptions and experiences of the members of the Iranian diaspora when initiating or becoming part of a transnational network. We need to emphasize that these interviews are only a selection of the many interviews and informal talks which form part of the long-term research looking at Iranians in diaspora, which began with a focus on political activists and later expanded to include a larger group of diaspora organizations and activities in the US and in a number of European countries. Nonetheless, we believe that our interviews, especially those concerning charity networks, allow us to make some, albeit tentative, conclusions, which we present at the end of this article.

In this research, the use of new technology, especially the Internet, has enabled us to adopt a research approach known as *virtual ethnography* (Hine, 2000; Mann and Stewart, 2000). In the last decade, Iranians have proven to be one of the most active groups using the Internet (Graham and Khosravi, 2002). Many organizations are involved in arranging interviews and discussion programmes on the Net, for example via 'Paltalk'.[2] As we were informed, many Iranians in Iran listen to these programmes, which give them an alternative channel of information. In addition, different Iranian e-journals, such as www.Iranian.com, provide space for transnational

1. Of course, Iranians who were supporters of the Pahlavi regime (1926–79) were not politically active in the revolution. Nevertheless, the characteristic of being politically oriented in the diaspora also applies to this group, who mainly left Iran at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s.
2. Paltalk is a new electronic medium, which allows the users to see, hear and share files with anyone, anywhere in the world. This programme is used by many Iranians all around the world to organize and participate in discussions on a range of themes.

discussions among Iranians. Taken together, the content of these different sites on the Net and the personal interviews have provided us with quite a unique methodological combination to explore a space within transnational connections through which identity and network come together.

BACKGROUND OF THE IRANIAN DIASPORA

Despite its initial ideals of freedom and equality, the Iranian revolution of 1979 did not turn out that way for the political opposition or for women. The first half of the 1980s can be considered one of the most repressive periods in the recent history of Iran. During that same period, the war with Iraq (which lasted from 1980 to 1988) started. Combined with the political oppression of the revolutionary regime, the war resulted in the closing of national borders for several years. When the borders reopened in the mid 1980s, a large number of Iranians had already been smuggled out and had started new lives elsewhere. The opening of the borders did not result in much greater transborder movement either physically or virtually. During these years the image of the new Iran was so negative that it became almost impossible for Iranians to obtain travel visas from any Western country, even if they were able to acquire legal travel documents from the Iranian regime. The result was that a large number of the Iranian diaspora left Iran with either illegal exit documents or illegitimate entry documents. Iran was also left behind much of the rest of the world in terms of technological developments. The war, the regime and the isolation of Iran resulted in a kind of 'forced' physical and virtual separation from the rest of the world. This had undeniable effects both on the Iranians who left Iran and the ones who stayed.

Compared with other diaspora groups such as the Jewish diaspora, the existence of an Iranian diaspora is quite recent. Before the revolution of 1979, the number of Iranians residing outside Iran — either in exile or as migrants — was somewhere in the tens of thousands. After the revolution, that number passed the million mark, spread throughout the world but mainly located in the USA, Canada and Europe. There is no exact number for the Iranian diaspora but most estimates range between 1 and 4 million.[3] The largest concentration is in the US, mainly in the state of California. Southern California, and in particular Los Angeles, is commonly referred to a second Iran, or 'Irangeles' (Kelly and Friedlander, 1993). The estimated number of Iranians in Los Angeles is somewhere between 200,000 and 1 million (for elaboration, see Ghorashi, 2003).

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3. Spellman (2004: 1) writes about an estimated one million people who live outside Iran. Different media (including Iranian) mention a higher number of Iranian diaspora, somewhere between 4 and 6 million.

As with any diaspora group, the Iranian diaspora is quite diverse. This diversity includes religious background (Muslims, Jews, Bahai's, Christians), political background (leftist, nationalist, monarchist), social class, education, gender and generations (Kelly and Friedlander, 1993). This heterogeneity in many ways defines how members of the Iranian diaspora position themselves in relation to Iran and/or within transnational space. McAuliffe (2007: 316) shows, for example, that second generation Bahai's in diaspora — a minority group, which was severely suppressed after the revolution in Iran — had noticeably less interest in e-mail connections with Iran than the same generation of Iranians from a Muslim majority background, who engaged in intensive electronic communication with people in Iran. In our study the differences in relation to Iran seemed to be less dominant for the majority of first generation Iranians who, throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, shared a hatred of the Iranian regime, which served as a binding factor for a fairly heterogeneous Iranian diaspora. This hatred and anger towards the Iranian regime long remained an essential part of the identity of members of this diaspora, to the extent that it transcended, at least initially, other differences.

Many Iranians inside Iran struggled to improve their positions within the limiting space of the Islamic republic. In the 1990s, this resulted in the formation of a limited form of civil society within the context of the political reformist movement in Iran. Many NGOs started their struggle to become independent of the state, and activists started to claim, although not without fear, as much space as possible to express their ideas. Despite the changes in Iran, the gap between Iranians inside and outside remained wide in the 1990s. On the one hand, the diaspora's memory of the repressive situation in Iran made them suspicious of any kind of activism from within the country. Those memories were differentiated, based on specific positioning in the past, yet the extreme suppression of those years served to marginalize the differences. On the other hand, Iranian activists inside the country felt ignored and distrusted the judgement of those living in the diaspora, believing that this group had been gone too long and was too far away to know the true situation. This mutual distance and distrust hindered contacts for some time (Ghorashi and Tavakoli, 2006).

In these years of isolation from Iran, the sense of a 'lost home' combined with a strong urge to return formed the core identity within Iranian transnational networks. Several studies have shown that the urge to return has different meanings for various groups within a diaspora. Al-Rasheed, for example, demonstrated a difference between two refugee groups in England: Iraqi Arabs (majority group) and Iraqi Assyrians (minority group). While the urge to return is quite present in the majority group (Iraqi Arabs), based on their strong sense of connection to Iraq as the homeland, the minority group (Iraqi Assyrians), on the other hand, expressed doubts about returning to Iraq and viewed exile as a permanent solution (Al-Rasheed, 1994: 204).

McAuliffe (2007: 316) found a comparable pattern in relation to the Iranian Muslim majority as opposed to the Iranian Baha'i minority.

In spite of these differences, however, the dominant pattern for the majority of Iranian exiles in the 1980s was based on the image of a repressive regime in Iran. The symbol of Iran as a 'thorn bird' or Iranians as 'thorn people' carrying the pain of their loss of a homeland around the world has been the central theme connecting a large group of Iranians worldwide. This exilic sense of common loss as the core identity led to increased forms of exchange through cyberspace and the construction of virtual communities. Through this sense of loss and uprootedness, a growing number of Iranians outside Iran started to reach out to each other, mainly through the Internet. They connected more and more emotionally to the construction of a new collective nostalgic identity, that of being an Iranian, with the added condition of being an Iranian in exile (see also Naficy, 1993). In spite of this level of connectedness, however, the politically fraught conditions of those years resulted in tensions and distrust among the members of the diaspora (see also van den Bos, 2006: 86).

Whilst acknowledging the existence of a diversity of backgrounds and positioning by members of the Iranian diaspora, some general patterns of transformation have nevertheless emerged. Some authors have noted a rise of cultural activities among Iranians replacing the dominance of political activities in the 1980s (van den Bos, 2006; Naficy, 1993; Spellman, 2004; Sreberny, 2000). Similarly, we have observed a shift from an exilic to a diasporic identity, which we will examine below.

IRANIAN NETWORKS AND THE VIRTUAL

Transnational, virtual networks of Iranians outside Iran not only created a new space for many, they also enabled the creation of a virtual sense of belonging with others who shared their loss. The increase of virtual networks and virtual embedded ties initially seemed to serve mainly as a safe place for many members of the Iranian diaspora to connect; it later led to increased interaction with Iranians in Iran as well. McAuliffe (2007: 316) shows that even though second generation Baha'i Iranians had less e-mail contact with Iranians in Iran, they were still present in transnational space, connecting virtually to Iranians outside Iran. Whilst aware of the risk of homogenizing the Iranian diaspora and its members' cross-border virtual connections, we do believe that the use of the Internet enabled many to cross community borders that had seemed completely closed for years. A change in the political climate in Iran, which began in the mid 1990s, combined with the growth of the reformist movement there, further stimulated the development of transnational contacts between many Iranians inside and outside Iran. The image of the Iranian regime of the 1980s as completely repressive was no longer held by a significant group within the Iranian

diaspora, who acknowledged that the sense of oppression varied among different groups of Iranians. This growing differentiation of experiences towards Iran led to increasing transnational online and offline exchanges between Iranians outside and inside Iran. This caused a change of identity pattern within the diaspora, leading first to a less exclusive attitude towards Iranians in Iran and then to a rising number of activities and networks with Iran. The growth of these transnational exchanges with Iran contributed in turn to further changes of identity within the Iranian diaspora in different ways.

An early sign of change was an increased openness towards activists inside Iran and an acceptance of the possibility of NGOs within the country, which would have been unimaginable in the 1980s. Another sign was the realization that the Iranian diaspora was not homogeneous in its views of Iran. This seemed to be true even for the groups that were considered to share the same view, such as Iranian leftists in exile. Different groups of politically oriented Iranians all over the world started to clash with each other over their different views of the situation in Iran.

One such clash occurred at the 2000 Berlin conference. In April that year, the *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* and the *Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt* in Berlin organized the conference 'Iran after Elections' on civil society and the reform process in Iran. The aim of the conference was to bring Iranian intellectuals, politicians and artists from inside and outside Iran together to review the latest developments in Iran. When a representation of the Iranian opposition in diaspora disrupted the meetings by shouting slogans and preventing the participants from speaking, the conference was transformed into a volatile political arena. This was followed by other actions such as a striptease performed by a woman and a man, which was repeatedly shown on national television in Iran and spread throughout the world via the Internet. The conservatives in power in Iran used this incident to demonstrate that Islam and the Islamic Republic had been insulted during the conference.

Among the participants of the conference from Iran were the human rights activist and lawyer Mehrangiz Kar, journalist and the editor of *Zanan* Shahla Sherkat, outspoken reformist cleric Hojatoleslam Hasan Yusefi-Eshkevari, who was the elected MP (of the sixth parliament) from Tehran, journalist Jamileh Kadivar, journalist and researcher Akbar Ganji, publisher and human rights activist Shahla Lahiji, in addition to the famous writers Mahmoud Dolatabadi and Mohammad Ali Sepanlou (see also Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006). Upon their return to Iran, a revolutionary court in Tehran tried these activist participants for attending the conference. Many were sentenced to several years in prison. Iranian activists who had been risking their lives in Iran were thus attacked both by a number of Iranian 'radical leftist' activists living in diaspora, and by the conservative powers in Iran.

The painful events of the conference became the focus of online and offline discussions inside and outside Iran, a major talking point on the Internet and

in formal and informal gatherings in the US and in Europe. Online and offline discussions were used interchangeably to air views related to Iran and the space for activism in Iran. This, in turn, led to reflections on the views held by many members of the Iranian political diaspora *vis-à-vis* Iran. The price was high, but the incident alerted an increasing number of this group to the changes within Iran. Some factions started to re-evaluate their previous positions — political/exilic positions that had been a core feature of their identity in the 1980s, but were already shifting slowly.[4] More and more Iranians outside Iran started to distance themselves from a nostalgic connection to the past and to invest in connections with other Iranians, in diaspora and in Iran, which were based on shared interests and activities. The initial exilic identity, with its rooted notion of a home left behind, was replaced by a more rhizomatic network-based diasporic approach to Iran as one basis of reference among many others.

TRANSNATIONAL CHARITY FOR IRAN

This section looks at a number of transnational charity networks for Iran. The cases presented show the multi-layered nature of charity to Iran and what has been achieved by connecting various sites and spaces.

Our first case study is the UK-based organization the Science and Art Foundation (SAF).[5] In the terms used by Burt (2005), the Iranian Professor of Computer Science and Mathematics, Abbas Edalat, who founded the organization in 1999, can be seen as a broker. SAF is a registered charity in the UK, US, France and Sweden. It has been able to establish computer labs with Internet connectivity in a variety of schools throughout Iran. More interesting in the context of this article is the way that this organization has been able to mobilize a portion of the Iranian diaspora to gain funding for projects and to work on projects developed together with its main Iranian partner, Sharif University, the top technical university in Tehran. In order to reach the Iranian diaspora, Dr Edalat or members of his staff travelled to a variety of countries and discussed projects in person with different diaspora groups. In an interview with one of the active members[6] of the Children's Foundation or *Bonyad-e Koodak* in Southern California,[7] an encounter with SAF founder Dr Edalat was described thus:

> This organization [SAF] has done a very good job. They go to the schools and universities in Iran and create computer centres and Internet connections . . . . Dr Edalat came here once,

4. This information is based on informal conversations with different Iranians and participation in heated discussions on the subject at various gatherings in California, Berlin and Amsterdam.
5. See: http://www.science-arts.org/
6. For the sake of anonymity we will refer to this informant as Ms Afshar.
7. Founded in 1994 (see http://www.childfoundation.org/).

> and I met with him during a private meeting. For about three years, *Bonyad* worked together with this organization. We provided computers for the schools in poor areas in Iran. Now these schools have new technology that is comparable to the best schools in the US. This organization is very active. It is a role model for how NGOs should work. I think that the connections created by SAF are very important for the children in Iran. As I have understood, Iranians in the US were really willing to donate to SAF and Dr Edalat was able to collect a large amount of money through his visits in the US. (Interview with Ms Afshar, California, October 2001)

The success of an organization such as SAF in the US is related to the ways in which it has been able to approach and involve others through online and offline connections, although this is also combined with the context of the US in which fundraising is popular and effective. California is host to a wide range of Iranian organizations which are actively involved in fundraising to support children, women and the disabled in Iran. For example, the Persian Center, located in Berkeley, California, together with the Wheelchair Foundation, raised US$ 150,000 to buy 1,000 wheelchairs to send to Iran. The first shipment took place in December 2001 (see Persian Center, 2002). In an interview in 2003, the president of the Persian Center, Ms Nouri, emphasized that the most important role for the Center in terms of networking is its ability to bring different types of charities together. She cited the example of the 'wheelchairs to Iran' programme in which the Center was able to connect different networks including an American firm and Americans who appreciated the cause (including a group of Iranians in Northern California), with individuals and organizations inside Iran who needed wheelchairs.

Another case studied was the Children's Foundation, *Bonyad-e Koodak*, mentioned above, a California-based organization which (amongst other things) helps blind children in Iran. Ms Afshar recounted the following story:

> An Iranian woman who lived in the US went to Iran and visited some . . . centers for blind children and interviewed the director of one of these centers. She broadcast the interview on Iranian TV and Radio in California and then the activities started. It was the same time that *Bonyad-e koodak* also planned to show the film, *Rang-e Khoda* (The Color of God), which is about a blind child, at one of their meetings. Many came to that meeting and spontaneously donated a total amount of around US$ 5,000 that we gave to that center for the blind in Iran. After that, the *Bonyad* started its separate division on blind children. Since then many things have been donated to those centers in Iran such as: buildings, furniture, glasses for children and tape recorders. (Interview with Ms Afshar, California, October 2001)

The idea of *Bonyad-e koodak* is that people donate money to support a child in another country. The organization is worldwide, but since the founder is an Iranian in the US, most of the children supported live in Iran.[8] Fundraising has not always been easy for the organization:

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8. See http://www.childfoundation.org/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx.

> It was in the 1990s after some research in Iran that we decided to start. The first two years were not that successful in terms of getting big donations. It was successful on a small scale because only the organizations around us helped us in that period. And because we were not in big money networks we were not successful in collecting money. Then some Iranians joined us who had the right networks. There is a woman, for example, who knew many important Iranians and there is another man who is a psychologist and knew the doctors; his brother was active in the religious community and they knew religious people with money. In this way we got connected to where the money was. (Interview with Ms Afshar, California, October 2001)

The empirical research in California between 1997 and 1999 reflects this evolution. Initially we observed intense discussions on this issue in the course of various offline gatherings. There seemed to be little space for any kind of charity-related activity targeting Iran: the possibilities for independent activities in Iran were seen as too unreliable. By the end of the 1990s, the situation was changing and more possibilities were arising. There has been a growth in interest in fundraising even among some of the more cautious and doubtful Iranians in the diaspora.[9] In order to organize and mobilize the network, a mixture of online and offline activities have been used, with websites, journals and satellite TV programmes used as vehicles to inform Iranians about charitable projects. The result has been not only an increasing interest in donating money to different projects in Iran, but also a growth in the amounts of money donated. Ms Afshar explains this phenomenon:

> I have to say that the importance of fundraising came up in the last four, five years. Before, collecting money was quite a difficult job, but gradually we became stronger and stronger. Then organizations realized that people really are interested in charity, and you need good channels to reach them. This interest in charity has different reasons. Firstly, people think they have achieved something and want to give it back to society. Now they see that it is time to help an Iranian child who needs help. In the beginning, the focus was mainly on Iranian children, but you see now that it is getting more global and not limited to Iranians. So people want to return something now that they are successful themselves. Secondly, this is the way that some people could respond to their emotions. They miss Iran but they live here and feel American as well. But then they want to do something for the country of their past, for their memories of the past. This is something emotional. Thirdly, there are some who do it for status. They realize that they receive appreciation and attention. Also for professionals it is good publicity. You see when it goes around that someone has donated a large amount of money to the charity, they gain the trust of the community and that means more business. (Interview with Ms Afshar, California, October 2001)

There are different layers present in this interview. The first layer is the growing importance of charity for Iran and its link to a shift in diasporic identity that began at the end of the 1990s.[10] The second layer is the way that charity has formed a bridge with the past: through charitable donations, successful Iranians are able to reconcile their past by giving something back.

9. For an interesting piece on this, see Tehranchi (2001).
10. As noted earlier, this shift towards more transnational activities does not necessarily have to coincide with charity work in Iran, as is the case with Baha'is.

It helps them project an image of themselves as noble citizens, which also improves their business opportunities in the present. In this way, charity not only provides an emotional link to the past, but has a pragmatic side as well: it strengthens existing social capital and is good for business. The third layer is the shift outwards. When a diasporic group first becomes involved with charitable giving, it is mainly based on ethnic/national lines, in this case Iranians helping Iranian children. After some time, however, these lines tend to blur, and charity can become trans-ethnic, in this case including support for children from other countries as well.

Differentiation on Political Issues

The examples above suggest a shift from a nostalgic relationship with Iran to a more action-oriented attitude. However, this does not mean that the majority of the Iranian diaspora were in favour of these new activities. While a number of organizations in California were busy with fundraising, other organizations were concerned that such activities could help the Iranian regime to stay in power, and therefore did not support them. Some active political organizations (mostly referred to as 'radical leftists') kept regime change at the heart of their agendas. Although they had lost the dominance they enjoyed in the 1980s, and now occupied a somewhat marginal position, these organizations were still a presence within transnational public fora. They clearly articulated their opposition to any actions which would directly or indirectly lend legitimacy to the regime. This clash of ideas was present in different organized fora in the diaspora. We observed one such forum — the transnational conferences of IWSF — more closely (see Ghorashi and Tavakoli, 2006).

IWSF (Iranian Women's Scientific Foundation; see www.iwsf.org) started its activities in 1990 and soon became the most active Iranian transnational diaspora organization focused on women's issues. Every year hundreds of Iranian women living outside Iran and invitees from inside Iran attend its three-day conference. The conference has been held in different cities, primarily in the United States and Canada, but recently also in Europe. There have been several incidents at IWSF conferences in which activists from Iran were verbally attacked by some of those living in the diaspora. Whilst these attacks were mainly based on positions taken by the delegates, the fact that participants from Iran were wearing headscarves was sometimes also an issue.[11] Our interviews with participants of different IWSF conferences

11. Many leftist 'radical political activists' consider the headscarf to be a sign of co-operation with the Iranian regime. In fact, the invitees from Iran were mainly wearing headscarves during the conference because of their fear of the regime upon their return to Iran. Although the majority of these activists came from an Islamic background, they considered themselves to be atheists.

revealed a gradual change of attitude. In the organization's early years, the dominance of women with radical leftist ideas was almost absolute. Towards the end of the 1990s, there were more women attending the conferences and more opposing the dominance of this extreme political position. This meant that clashes at the conferences were no longer between a dominant diaspora group and the activists from Iran, but between different diaspora groups. From the early 2000s, the radical left lost the relative dominance it had enjoyed for years and became just one of many views presented at the conference.

As the examples above have shown, there has been an observable change in the power balance within the diaspora. The 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were dominated by an exilic attitude within the Iranian diaspora which made any kind of humanitarian action towards Iran almost impossible. Everything was strongly political and mainly oriented towards regime change. Patterns gradually started to change from the mid-1990s. It became acceptable to initiate certain Iran-related projects from a humanitarian perspective. This new positioning meant that the transnational diasporic network became more of a network of activities with pragmatic aims. It was no longer the 'lost home' notion that was dominant within the Iranian diaspora, but 'Iranian society in need'. By the beginning of this century, even more Iranian organizations in the diaspora were using both online and offline transnational networks, and the national networks of their new countries, to develop projects in Iran. This shift in approach was accelerated by two events.

SHIFTING IDENTITY: OPENING OF A NEW SPACE

In December 2003, Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian woman lawyer and human rights activist, received the Nobel peace prize. In the same month, a horrifying earthquake shook the historical city of Bam and tens of thousands of people lost their lives. Both of these had a huge impact on Iranians both inside and outside Iran. While Shirin Ebadi's prize became a source of joy and hope for the future for the majority of Iranians, the Bam earthquake left them feeling shocked and powerless. The involvement of a large group from the Iranian diaspora in both events — in the form of transnational activities with Iran — has been significant. For the first time, millions of dollars were donated from the Iranian diaspora to Iran to help the survivors of Bam. Such a large transfer of money to Iran by members of the diaspora was unthinkable in the 1980s or even in the 1990s. The prevailing belief that no independent organizations existed in Iran kept many in the diaspora from sending money, convinced that their contributions would end up in the hands of their enemy, the Iranian regime. When such a large amount of money was sent in 2003, it signalled a dramatic shift of pattern from exilic identity to a diasporic identity on the part of a large portion of the Iranian diaspora.

This shift also led to a change in the pattern of transnational activities and networks. The newly constructed Iranian (virtual) diasporic community became more interested in discovering what was going on in Iran and supporting activities there, instead of maintaining a radical political view that ruled out the possibility of activities in Iran. This more inclusive attitude meant that parts of the diaspora not only accepted the existence of a civil society in Iran but they also started to contribute to its strengthening. New transnational networks, partly enabled by the Internet, now served as a bridge to connect large groups of Iranians worldwide to efforts to reconstruct their country of origin. In this way the content of transnational activities for many changed from exclusively political to more inclusive and with a humanitarian bent. This is not the case across the board: van den Bos (2006: 83), for example, has shown that Iranian–Dutch networks remain politically oriented, exclusive and isolated. Whilst this seems to be a tendency among those with an entirely political focus, we can observe an opening up of many networks towards broader activities. The purely political networks are becoming more isolated. In other words, members of the diaspora who were involved in political activities in the narrow sense of the word in the 1980s, are now becoming political in the broader sense of engaging with social and political change.

In the past few years there has been a dramatic growth in the number of individuals and organizations involved in fundraising in order to support Iranian NGOs and different target groups such as children or the victims of the Bam earthquake. In the following section we examine one of the activities related to Bam.

SPRC and the Bam Earthquake

This case study pertains to the activities of the Society for Protecting the Rights of the Child (SPRC; see http://www.irsprc.org/english/). This organization was founded in 1994 by several Iranian public figures, including Shirin Ebadi. Another founder of the organization, Mahdocht Sanati, has been active in organizing the Iranian diaspora to support children's rights in Iran. As a representative of the International branch of SPRC, the Iranian Children's Rights Society (ICRS), Ms Sanati organized several gatherings with Iranian individuals and organizations in the US. During our fieldwork in 1997–2003 in Los Angeles, the name of Ms Sanati came up frequently within Iranian circles. The earthquake in Bam accelerated the activities and the impact of many NGOs in Iran, including this organization. Whilst many volunteered to help Ms Sanati during her stay in the US, and to help the SPRC, the amount of help offered after the Bam Earthquake was of a different scale. One of the enthusiastic volunteers who helped Ms Sanati for years, Ms Jila Kashef, told us of her experience:

> Some years ago I met Mahdocht Sanati while she was in the US. She had been active in Iran for many years regarding children's rights. We organized many different programs so that we could collect funds and information for Iran. We held many fundraisers for Iran, especially for street children and Afghani children. We wanted to provide some financial and social support for these children. Then when Bam happened I went there personally on my own account, and I have to say that the support of Iranian diaspora was really great. Iranians have a great feeling for their country and when they see an organization, which is serious and trustworthy, they really help. When Bam happened, we started a large campaign for fundraising. There were ten or eleven people who did it all. For example, there was an Iranian woman who was at that moment in between jobs so for one and half months she did not go after any job and worked full time on the fundraising activity. We did a lot of work to have this fundraiser for Bam and during the ceremony when I was talking about Bam, 90 per cent of the audience was crying and everybody was emotional about it. Everybody was working with their hearts and souls. People really wanted to help and they really did. (Interview with Ms Jila Kashef, California, April 2006)[12]

Reacting to the earthquake left little time for many members of the Iranian diaspora to ponder their involvement with Iran. After Bam, the transnational online and offline connections between the diaspora and Iran grew to a scale previously unknown. The earthquake made an increasing number within the Iranian diaspora realize that their contribution could make a difference in Iran, albeit a minor one. Accepting the existence of NGOs in Iran and, more importantly, the willingness to contribute financially to these NGOs, meant a major shift in the identity of many within the Iranian diaspora. The events of December 2003 resulted in increased transnational connections and a much more intensive relationship between groups in the diaspora, certain Iranian NGOs and many activists in Iran. A number of Iranian NGOs became the link between those in the Iranian diaspora who were ready to help and those within Iran who needed that help, while the online and offline transnational networks enabled co-operation in many ways. The existing online transnational networks within the Iranian diaspora continued to initiate new activities to strengthen previously existing ties and/or to create new (virtually embedded) ones.

Changing Patterns, Increasing Activities

Virtual space was essential for the Iranian diasporas[13] to initiate new transnational connections. This was especially important during the 1980s when the strict policing of the Iranian national border limited physical interactions. These virtual — and, later, increasingly physical — transnational interactions enabled novel forms of negotiation regarding the diapora's positioning towards Iran. We have tried to demonstrate the shift in the dominant patterns

12. See also Dowlatabadi (2004).
13. Writing diaspora in plural form refers to the differentiated manners through which this connection was made (see also van den Bos, 2006; McAuliffe, 2007).

of thinking, from the early exilic identity that mourned the 'lost home', to a new sense of hope and enthusiasm for change in Iran in the 1990s. However, the positioning of Iranians in diaspora is quite differentiated and influenced by many factors, including religion, ethnicity, age and socio-economic background. Political identity dominated the orientation and positioning of the diaspora group for as long as a decade, and many studies have indicated that political activities were by far the most important activities in the 1980s. With the passage of time, the political, in its absolute sense, changed to a differentiated form of connection to Iran and positioning in diaspora.

A growing number of Iranian diasporic transnational networks started to see their role as that of an essential channel, bringing the attention of the world to bear on Iran in order to encourage societal and possibly political change. This new enthusiasm meant an increased focus on Iran itself, and has resulted in emerging forms of online and offline activities. In addition to the transnational charity projects mentioned here, there has been an increase of exchange between Iranian scholars inside and outside the country. Many from inside Iran have been invited to attend conferences abroad and have enjoyed guest lectureships in universities around the world.

Iranian women's activists have also been exchanging ideas via different fora, including discussions through Paltalk or other Internet sites such as www.womeniniran.com. On International Women's Day 2004, prominent Iranian feminists from all over the world used the Internet to discuss issues related to women and science, art, politics and sexuality. The IWSF conferences offer another forum. Since the 2004 IWSF conference held in Berlin, the event has been broadcast through Paltalk, which has made it possible for Iranian women around the world to take part. Iranian political organizations in diaspora also use online resoures to spread their ideas. Paltalk is also used for these political activities and discussions, while newly formed diaspora-based radio programmes, such as Radio Zamaneh (http://radiozamaneh.com/) are also offered through the Internet. In addition, Iranian e-journals provide space for transnational discussions among Iranians. Weblogs or 'blogs' (web diaries) are used extensively by Iranians and serve as an important source of transnational communication (Alavi, 2005).

There can be little doubt that the Internet is one of the most effective means to mediate between Iranians living all over the world. Since the beginning of this century, the Iranian transnational virtual network has brought many lives and spaces together with the result that constructed identities and network patterns have shifted and been rethought. This aspect of mediation has proven to be quite powerful in providing alternative spaces for interaction among Iranians worldwide by stretching the limiting boundaries of the Iranian nation state.

Nevertheless, the picture is not entirely rosy. Virtual space can be vulnerable, especially when coercive governments choose to limit that space. We should also remember that the changes described above have not been positive in any sense for Bahai's or members of certain political groups such as

Leftist groups or Mujahedin-e Khalgh, who remain the main targets of suppression and persecution in Iran. The political climate of the mid 2000s and the recent developments around the presidential election of 2009 show how vulnerable virtual space could be when restrained by oppressive regimes. Conservatives won the parliamentary elections of 2004. Reformists who, under the leadership of ex-president Khatami, had enjoyed the symbolic power of the presidency and a majority in the parliament, were limited by the actual power of conservatives such as the religious leader of Iran and other religious bodies holding key controlling positions. This resulted in a growing disillusionment on the part of the population and a loss of belief in the power of the reformists to bring about change, leading to the election of conservatives in 2004. The situation became even more worrying with the 2005 election of a conservative president in Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, who was re-elected in 2009.

Since the conservatives came to power, activists have been targeted on a variety of fronts. Many newspapers have been shut down and several individuals have been arrested or forbidden from leaving the country. New media, such as the Internet and weblogs, have not escaped: the fledgling civil society in Iran is under great pressure. The current government seems particularly threatened by transnational activities, as demonstrated by the arrests of a number of Iranian–American academics and the harassment of some Iranians who have contacts with people living outside Iran. These developments have led the American government and the UN to enforce harsh policies towards Iran, which in turn have further reduced the possibilities for Iranians to leave Iran and for those living in diaspora to provide financial support to Iran. In a recent interview, Mahdocht Sanati of the SPRC, emphasized this point:

> There are almost no NGOs in Iran anymore. There are many of them in name, but I am sorry to say that their activities have changed over time . . . . After the latest elections and the dominance of the conservatives, the activities of the NGOs have been very limited. Also we face limitations from the US government. We have a bank account in the US. In one year, for example, we were able to collect US$ 150,000 but we were doubtful to transfer the money to the management team of our organization in Iran at that time, so we did not send the money then. Now we cannot transfer the money to Iran at all anymore; the money has sat for about 5 years in our account, and we cannot do anything about it. (Interview with Mahdocht Sanati, California, July 2008)

Transnational networks can be a factor in redefining local power relations. After years of physical and virtual separation, the impact of transnational connections in the past decades brought new possibilities and challenges for the ways in which Iranians could negotiate and reshape the locality of their actions. These transnational interactions have proven to be influential in changing patterns of thought amongst those within the Iranian diaspora who have a political orientation. Indeed, 25 July 2009 provided a historical moment in the way that the Iranian diaspora has been united in support of the

social movement in Iran.[14] In this support we see a shift in political activism from partisan political activities towards a (social and political) support for the movement in Iran. The new media such as SMS, Facebook, Youtube, (photo)blogs such as Tehranlive.org and the social network site Twitter have been adopted to mobilize and extend the voices of opposition during and after the presidential election of 2009. The virtual space has been remarkably enabling, both in connecting the voice of protest in Iran to the global world, and in uniting the Iranian diaspora transnationally in support of the movement. However, although Twitter, especially, proved to be quite resilient to censorship due to its access flexibility, the growing tendency of the Iranian government to block access to these new media and to suppress transnational activities and networks shows that these rhizomatic networks are not free floating. Although they might appear to be deterritorialized, separated from the nation state, they are in fact subject to constant reterritorialization within a local and national situatedness, showing that even if nation states are less important in this globalized world, they remain influential in defining terms and actions within transnational space.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have shown that the slow formation of transnational connections and networks among the Iranian diaspora resulted in greater transnational interaction with Iranians in Iran by the end of 1990s. This in turn led to a shift in the dominant pattern of identity by a growing number of Iranians in diaspora from an exilic identity, with a 'lost home' notion at its core and a strongly politicized notion of change, towards a more diasporic identity with a more humanitarian notion of change. With the passing of time, the Iranian diaspora has begun to discover its transnational potential and has used both online and offline opportunities to organize itself in a rhizomatic network.

We also showed that the transnational connection was not based on a singular, rooted connection of migrants to their homeland but is a form of connectedness that brings different lines and sites together. The transnational space connects many Iranians both inside and outside Iran (as also argued by van den Bos, 2006). Through these connections we observed a co-production of offline and online activities through which political (and other) views were discussed and negotiated. In this way, transnational space becomes a space in which different physical and virtual positions and actions overlap, enabling the construction and negotiation of identities and interactions among Iranians all over the world.

14. See the website www.unite4iran.org (last visited on 28 July 2009) which shows that in 110 cities in the world demonstrations were organized by the diaspora in support of the movement in Iran.

Although our focus in this article has been on the emerging networks of Iranians in diaspora and in Iran, we are not suggesting that every individual Iranian in diaspora can decide how or whether to participate in transnational networks. We argued above that the social context around the network relationships — including the nation state — contain both enabling and constraining forces; but we have also tried to show that the notion of the multi-sitedness of transnational networks has enabled many members of the Iranian diaspora to reflect upon their initial positions toward Iran. In that sense, this embedded virtual network has served as an alternative space to enable an identity shift from exilic to diasporic for a portion of the Iranian diaspora. This, in turn, has informed a more humanitarian choice for actions targeting Iran. This alternative space can only be approached through an appreciation of its multiple connections: for our research, that meant developing sensitivity for all the sites involved, in addition to understanding their limitations. In that sense, one of the limitations for this study has been the restricted access to Iran as one of the essential sites of this particular transnational network. This has led to the article focusing on the changing patterns of identity on the side of the diaspora and its various sites of locality and action.

In this article we have examined the situatedness of the 'Iranian diaspora' in terms of its members' changing relations to Iran over the past two decades; the intensive use of new technology both inside and outside of Iran in the last decade; and the role of social capital within the new societies of diaspora members. In spite of the specific conditions of this diaspora group we believe that our study has relevance beyond the particular dynamics of the Iranian diaspora. We have argued that a transnational lens presents a different view of the changing dynamics of a diaspora group and its multi-layered positioning. In addition, a rhizomatic approach to networks provides new insights in research on diaspora and development by challenging the assumed 'rootedness' of diaspora and revealing other lines of networked connections — including virtual embedded ties — in which different localities could overlap.

Inevitably, some of the conclusions of this study remain specific to the Iranian diaspora (such as the experience of the revolution), but other aspects are likely to be shared by other diaspora communities, such as the change from exilic to diasporic patterns, which could relate to shifts in identity processes connected to the impact of technological change. For that reason, comparative research among different diaspora groups would be informative. It would also be interesting to explore more deeply what Kilduff and Corley (1999) call the 'diaspora effect', showing the influence of diasporas on the countries that were left behind. This would be of special relevance when considering the diasporic source of development initiatives as one of the essential sources of future development issues. This opens up the possibility of enlarging the study into the virtual and actual dimensions of the Iranian networks as well as those of other diasporas.

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